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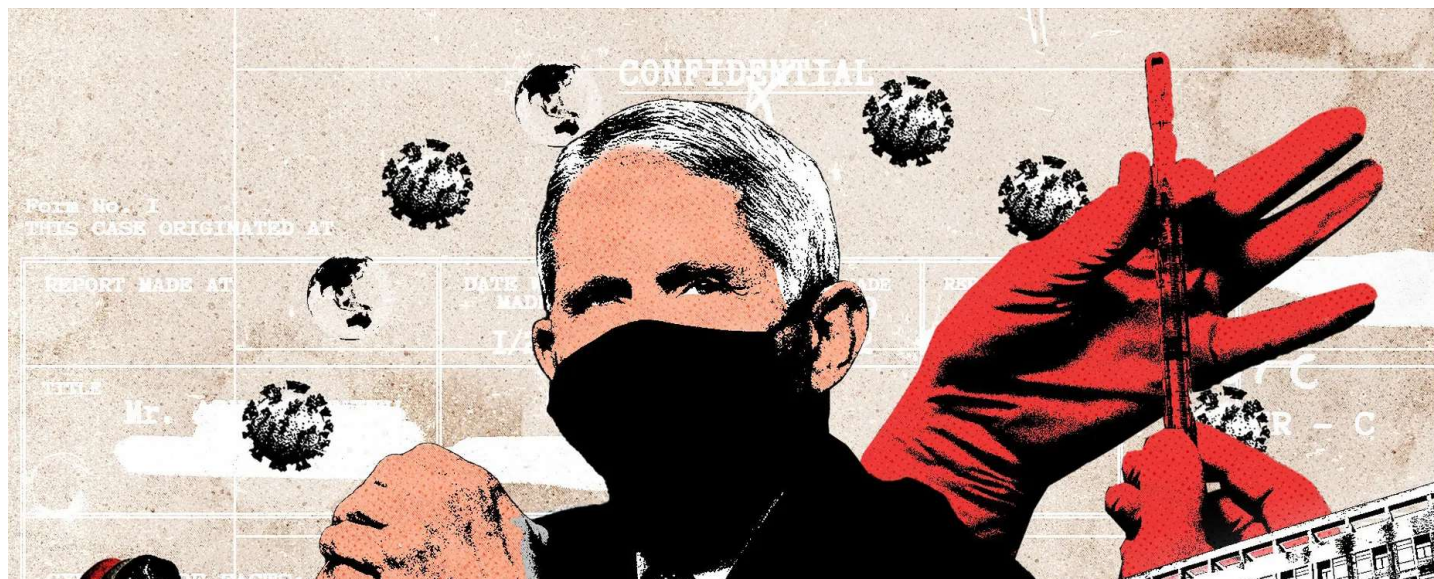
“This Shouldn’t Happen”: Inside the Virus-Hunting Nonprofit at the Center of the Lab-Leak Controversy

Chasing scientific renown, grant dollars, and approval from Dr. Anthony Fauci, Peter Daszak transformed the environmental nonprofit EcoHealth Alliance into a government-funded sponsor of risky, cutting-edge virus research in both the U.S. and Wuhan, China. Drawing on more than 100,000 leaked documents, a *V.F.* investigation shows how an organization dedicated to preventing the next pandemic found itself suspected of helping start one.



BY KATHERINE EBAN

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On June 18, 2021, an evolutionary biologist named Jesse D. Bloom sent the draft of an unpublished scientific paper he'd written to Dr. Anthony Fauci, the chief medical adviser to the president of the United States. A bespectacled, boyish-looking 43-year-old often clad in short-sleeved checkered shirts, Bloom specializes in the study of how viruses evolve. "He is the most ethical scientist I know," said Sergei Pond, a fellow evolutionary biologist. "He wants to dig deep and discover the truth."

The paper Bloom had written—known as a preprint, because it had yet to be peer-reviewed or published—contained sensitive revelations about the National Institutes of Health, the federal agency that oversees biomedical research. In the interests of transparency, he wanted Fauci, who helms an NIH subagency, the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), to see it ahead of time. Under ordinary circumstances, the preprint might have sparked a respectful exchange of views. But this was no ordinary preprint, and no ordinary moment.

More than a year into the pandemic, the genesis of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, was still a mystery. Most scientists believed that it had made the leap from bats to humans naturally, via an intermediary species, most likely at a market in Wuhan, China, where live wild animals were slaughtered and sold. But a growing contingent were asking if it could have originated inside a nearby laboratory that is known to have conducted risky coronavirus research funded in part by the United States. As speculation, sober and otherwise, swirled, the NIH was being bombarded by Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) lawsuits. Fauci himself needed a security detail,

owing to death threats from conspiracy theorists who believed he was covering up some dark secret.

Bloom's paper was the product of detective work he'd undertaken after noticing that a number of early SARS-CoV-2 genomic sequences mentioned in a published paper from China had somehow vanished without a trace. The sequences, which map the nucleotides that give a virus its unique genetic identity, are key to tracking when the virus emerged and how it might have evolved. In Bloom's view, their disappearance raised the possibility that the Chinese government might be trying to hide evidence about the pandemic's early spread. Piecing together clues, Bloom established that the NIH itself had deleted the sequences from its own archive at the request of researchers in Wuhan. Now, he was hoping Fauci and his boss, NIH director Francis Collins, could help him identify other deleted sequences that might shed light on the mystery.

Bloom had submitted the paper to a preprint server, a public repository of scientific papers awaiting peer review, on the same day that he'd sent a copy to Fauci and Collins. It now existed in a kind of twilight zone: not published, and not yet public, but almost certain to appear online soon.

Collins immediately organized a Zoom meeting for Sunday, June 20. He invited two outside scientists, evolutionary biologist Kristian Andersen and virologist Robert Garry, and allowed Bloom to do the same. Bloom chose Pond and Rasmus Nielsen, a genetic biologist. That it was shaping up like an old-fashioned duel with seconds in attendance did not cross Bloom's mind at the time. But six months after that meeting, he remained so troubled by what transpired that he wrote a detailed account, which *Vanity Fair* obtained.

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After Bloom described his research, the Zoom meeting became “extremely contentious,” he wrote. Andersen leapt in, saying he found the preprint “deeply troubling.” If the Chinese scientists wanted to delete their sequences from the

database, which NIH policy entitled them to do, it was unethical for Bloom to analyze them further, he claimed. And there was nothing unusual about the early genomic sequences in Wuhan.

Instantly, Nielsen and Andersen were “yelling at each other,” Bloom wrote, with Nielsen insisting that the early Wuhan sequences were “extremely puzzling and unusual.”

Andersen—who’d had some of his emails with Fauci from early in the pandemic publicly released through FOIA requests—leveled a third objection. Andersen, Bloom wrote, “needed security outside his house, and my pre-print would fuel conspiratorial notions that China was hiding data and thereby lead to more criticism of scientists such as himself.”

Fauci then weighed in, objecting to the preprint’s description of Chinese scientists “surreptitiously” deleting the sequences. The word was loaded, said Fauci, and the reason they’d asked for the deletions was unknown.

That’s when Andersen made a suggestion that surprised Bloom. He said he was a screener at the preprint server, which gave him access to papers that weren’t yet public. He then offered to either entirely delete the preprint or revise it “in a way that would leave no record that this had been done.” Bloom refused, saying that he doubted either option was appropriate, “given the contentious nature of the meeting.”

At that point, both Fauci and Collins distanced themselves from Andersen’s offer, with Fauci saying, as Bloom recalled it, “Just for the record, I want to be clear that I never suggested you delete or revise the pre-print.” They seemed to know that Andersen had gone too far.

Both Andersen and Garry denied that anyone in the meeting suggested deleting or revising the paper. Andersen said Bloom’s account was “false.” Garry dismissed it as “nonsense.” Sergei Pond, however, confirmed Bloom’s account as accurate, after having it read aloud to him. “I don’t remember the exact phrasing—I didn’t take any notes—but from what you described, that sounds accurate. I definitely felt bad for poor Jesse.” He added that the “charged-up” atmosphere struck him as “inappropriate for a scientific meeting.” A spokesperson for Fauci declined to comment.

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Six months after his contentious meeting with Fauci and other top scientists on June 20, 2021, Jesse Bloom made a written record of his recollections. *Vanity Fair* later obtained the document. [Click here to see and download the full document.](#)

The wagon-circling on that Zoom call reflected a siege mentality at the NIH whose cause was much larger than Bloom and the missing sequences. It couldn't be made to disappear with creative editing or deletion. And it all began with a once-obscure science nonprofit in Manhattan that had become the conduit for federal grant money to a Wuhan research laboratory.

In 2014, Fauci's agency had issued a \$3.7 million grant to EcoHealth Alliance, a nongovernmental organization dedicated to predicting and helping to prevent the next pandemic by identifying viruses that could leap from wildlife to humans. The grant, titled Understanding the Risk of Bat Coronavirus Emergence, proposed to screen wild and captive bats in China, analyze sequences in the laboratory to gauge the risk of bat viruses infecting humans, and build predictive models to examine future risk. The Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) was a key collaborator to whom EcoHealth Alliance gave almost \$600,000 in sub-awards. But the work there had been controversial enough that the NIH suspended the grant in July 2020.

As it happened, EcoHealth Alliance failed to predict the COVID-19 pandemic—even though it erupted into public view at the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market, a short drive from the WIV itself. In the ensuing months, every move of EcoHealth Alliance, and its voluble president Peter Daszak, came under scrutiny by a small army of scientific sleuths and assorted journalists. What, they wanted to know, had really gone on at the WIV? Why had Daszak been so cagey about the work his organization had been funding there? And were Fauci and other officials trying to direct attention away from research that the U.S. had been, at least indirectly, financing?

The dispute over COVID-19's origins has become increasingly acrimonious, with warring camps of scientists trading personal insults on Twitter feeds. Natural-origin proponents argue that the virus, like so many before it, emerged from the well-known phenomenon of natural spillover, jumping from a bat host to an intermediate species before going on to infect humans. Those suspecting a lab-related incident point to an array of possible scenarios, from inadvertent exposure of a scientist during field research to the accidental release of a natural or manipulated strain during laboratory work. The lack of concrete evidence supporting either theory has only increased the

rancor. “Everyone is looking for a smoking gun that would render any reasonable doubt impossible,” says Amir Attaran, a biologist and lawyer at the University of Ottawa. Without cooperation from the Chinese government, that may be impossible. In 2018, Daszak had appeared on Chinese state-run TV and said, “The work we do with Chinese collaborators is published jointly in international journals and the sequence data is uploaded onto the internet free for everyone to read, very open, very transparent, and very collaborative.” He added, “Science is naturally transparent and open.... You do something, you discover something, you want to tell the world about it. That’s the nature of scientists.”

But as COVID-19 rampaged across the globe, the Chinese government’s commitment to transparency turned out to be limited. It has refused to share raw data from early patient cases, or participate in any further international efforts to investigate the virus’s origin. And in September 2019, three months before the officially recognized start of the pandemic, the Wuhan Institute of Virology took down its database of some 22,000 virus samples and sequences, refusing to restore it despite international requests.

As for transparency-minded scientists in the U.S., Daszak early on set about covertly organizing a letter in the *Lancet* medical journal that sought to present the lab-leak hypothesis as a groundless and destructive conspiracy theory. And Fauci and a small group of scientists, including Andersen and Garry, worked to enshrine the natural-origin theory during confidential discussions in early February 2020, even though several of them privately expressed that they felt a lab-related incident was likelier. Just days before those discussions began, *Vanity Fair* has learned, Dr. Robert Redfield, a virologist and the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), had urged Fauci privately to vigorously investigate both the lab and natural hypotheses. He was then excluded from the ensuing discussions—learning only later that they’d even occurred. “Their goal was to have a single narrative,” Redfield told *Vanity Fair*.

Why top scientists linked arms to tamp down public speculation about a lab leak—even when their emails, revealed via FOIA requests and congressional review, suggest they held similar concerns—remains unclear. Was it simply because their views shifted in favor of a natural origin? Could it have been to protect science from the ravings of conspiracy theorists? Or to protect against a revelation that could prove fatal to certain

risky research that they deem indispensable? Or to protect vast streams of grant money from political interference or government regulation?

The effort to close the debate in favor of the natural-origin hypothesis continues today. In February, *The New York Times* gave **front-page treatment** to a set of preprints—written by Michael Worobey at the University of Arizona, Kristian Andersen at Scripps Research Institute, and 16 coauthors, including Garry—claiming that a new analysis of public data from the Huanan market in Wuhan provided “dispositive evidence” that the virus first leapt to humans from animals sold there. But a number of top scientists, Bloom among them, questioned that assertion, saying the preprints, while worthy, relied on incomplete data and found no infected animal.

“I don’t think they offer proof. They provide evidence that more strongly supports the link to the wild animal market than to the WIV, and that’s the way I would have phrased it,” says W. Ian Lipkin, an epidemiologist at Columbia University who favors the natural-origin theory.

“Some scientists seem almost hell-bent on naming the Huanan market as the site of the origin of the pandemic; and some members of the media seem more than happy to embrace these conclusions without careful examination,” said Stanford microbiologist David Relman. “This issue is far too important to be decided in the public domain by unreviewed studies, incomplete and unconfirmed data, and unsubstantiated proclamations.”

Perhaps more than anyone, Peter Daszak—a Western scientist immersed in Chinese coronavirus research at the Wuhan Institute of Virology—was uniquely positioned to help the world crack open the origin mystery, not least by sharing what he knew. But last year, Dr. Jeffrey Sachs, the Columbia University economist who oversees the *Lancet*’s COVID-19 commission, dismissed Daszak from the helm of a task force investigating the virus’s genesis, after he flatly refused to share progress reports from his contested research grant. (In written responses to detailed questions, Daszak said he was “simply following NIH guidance” when he declined Sachs’s request, because the agency was withholding the reports in question “until they had adjudicated a FOIA request.” The reports are now publicly available, he said.)

“[Daszak] and NIH have acted badly,” Sachs told *Vanity Fair*. “There has been a lack of transparency...and there is a lot more to know and that can be known.” He said that the

NIH should support an “independent scientific investigation” to examine the “possible role” in the pandemic of the NIH, EcoHealth Alliance, the Wuhan Institute of Virology, and a partner laboratory at the University of North Carolina. “Both hypotheses are still very much with us,” he said, and “need to be investigated seriously and scientifically.” (“We are also on record as welcoming independent scientific investigation into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic,” Daszak told *Vanity Fair*.)

This story is based on more than 100,000 internal EcoHealth Alliance documents obtained by *Vanity Fair*, as well as interviews with five former staff members and 33 other sources. The documents, most of which predate the pandemic, span a number of years and include budgets, staff and board meeting minutes, and internal emails and reports. While the documents do not tell us where COVID-19 came from, they shed light on the world in which EcoHealth Alliance has operated: one of murky grant agreements, flimsy oversight, and the pursuit of government funds for scientific advancement, in part by pitching research of steeply escalating risk.

The story of how Daszak’s grant entangled Fauci in the specter of Wuhan coronavirus research began years earlier, at a stately Beaux Arts social club in Washington, D.C. For more than a decade, EcoHealth Alliance hosted a series of cocktail parties at the Cosmos Club near DuPont Circle to discuss the prevention of viral outbreaks. There, expert biologists, virologists, and journalists mingled with the true guests of honor: federal government bureaucrats who were in the position to steer grants.

On invitations, EcoHealth Alliance described the events as “educational.” Inside the nonprofit, however, officials called them “cultivation events.” The return on investment was excellent: For about \$8,000 in Brie and Chardonnay per event, they got to network with prospective federal funders. As the organization’s 2018 strategic plan spelled out, “Given our strength in federal funding, we enhanced our cultivation events at the Cosmos Club in Washington DC, which now regularly attract 75-150 people at high levels in govt agencies, NGOs and the private sector.” (“These kinds of events are common among many nongovernmental organizations and nonprofits, which depend upon both public and private donors for support,” Daszak told *Vanity Fair*.)

Of all those high-level people, almost no one ranked as high as Fauci, a scientific kingmaker who dispensed billions in grant money each year—and Daszak was determined to share a podium with him. The idea was admittedly a reach. Though he'd met with Fauci and received funding from his agency, Daszak was relatively obscure. But he had cultivated back-channel access to the minders who guarded Fauci's calendar.

On September 9, 2013, Daszak emailed Fauci's senior adviser David Morens to see if the sought-after NIAID chief would be available as a panel speaker. Morens emailed back, recommending that Daszak "write Tony directly, thanking him for meeting with you all recently and then inviting him to be a member of this Cosmos Club discussion. That way, it is personal and doesn't look 'cooked' by us."

Though Fauci declined that invitation and several others, Daszak kept trying. In February 2016, Morens passed along a valuable tip: Fauci "normally says no to almost everything like this. Unless ABC, NBC, CBS, and Fox are all there with cameras running. If he were asked to give THE main talk or the only talk that might increase the chances."

The gambit worked. Fauci signed on to give a presentation on the Zika virus at the Cosmos Club on March 30, and the RSVPs flowed in. The guests came from an array of deep-pocketed federal agencies: the Department of Homeland Security, the U.S. Agency for International Development, the Pentagon, even NASA. As Daszak would declare at a board meeting on December 15, the "Washington, DC cultivation events have been a great way to increase our visibility to federal funders," according to meeting minutes. A month earlier, Donald Trump had been elected president. One board member at the meeting asked what his incoming administration might mean for a conservation nonprofit dependent on federal grants. Daszak offered breezy reassurance: The organization's "apolitical mission" would help it adapt.

Little did he know that, in the era of Trump and COVID-19, science itself would become the ultimate political battleground.

EcoHealth Alliance's D.C. "cultivation events," whose guest speakers would include Dr. Anthony Fauci, are said in board meeting minutes to improve "visibility" to federal funders. [Click here to see and download the full document.](#)

If a shared podium with Fauci proved that Daszak had become a true player among virus hunters, it also underscored just how far he had come. For years, Peter Daszak sat at the helm of a struggling nonprofit with a mission to save manatees, promote responsible pet ownership, and celebrate threatened species. The organization, which operated under the name Wildlife Trust until 2010, was constantly on the hunt for ways to close its budget shortfalls. One year, it proposed to honor at its annual benefit a mining company operating in Liberia that was paying it to assess the risks of Ebola virus. Another idea was to seek donations from palm-oil millionaires leveling rainforests who might be interested in "cleaning up" their image.

Balding and usually clad in hiking gear, Daszak was one part salesman, one part visionary. He saw clearly that human incursions into the natural world could lead to the emergence of animal pathogens, with bats a particularly potent reservoir. Daszak was “making a bet that bats were harboring deadly viruses,” said Dr. Matthew McCarthy, an associate professor of medicine at Weill Cornell Medical Center in New York. In 2004, as a 23-year-old Harvard medical student, McCarthy followed Daszak to Cameroon to trap bats. “I left my family, my friends,” he said. “It was a very powerful thing for people like me, going into the most remote parts of the world. I was taken by him, hook, line, and sinker.”

The bioterror attacks of 2001, in which letters dusted with anthrax spores were sent through the U.S. mail, coupled with the first SARS coronavirus outbreak in China the following year, would bring money for the study of lethal natural pathogens pouring into federal agencies. In 2003, the NIAID got an eye-popping \$1.7 billion for research to defend against bioterrorism.

Daszak’s office on Manhattan’s Far West Side didn’t have a laboratory. The closest bat colonies were in Central Park. But he cultivated an affiliation with Shi Zhengli, a Chinese scientist who would rise to become the director of the Wuhan Institute of Virology’s Center for Emerging Infectious Diseases. Slight and sophisticated with an international education, Shi became known in China as “bat woman” for her fearless exploration of their habitats. Daszak’s alliance with her would open China’s bat caves to him.

In 2005, after conducting field research in four locations in China, Daszak and Shi coauthored their first paper together, which established that horseshoe bats were a likely reservoir for SARS-like coronaviruses. They would go on to collaborate on 17 papers. In 2013, they reported their discovery that a SARS-like bat coronavirus, which Shi had been the first to successfully isolate in a lab, might be able to infect human cells without first jumping to an intermediate animal. “[Peter] respected her,” said the former EcoHealth Alliance staffer. “In the view of everyone, they were doing great work for the world.” Their partnership gave Daszak an almost proprietary sense of the bat caves in Yunnan province, which he would later refer to in a grant proposal as “our field test sites.”

As Daszak's staff and Shi's graduate students intermingled, traveling between Wuhan and Manhattan, the exchange flourished. When Shi visited New York, the EcoHealth staff selected a restaurant for a celebratory dinner with great care. "Zhengli is not one to stand on formality; she makes dumplings by hand with her students in the lab!!" Daszak's chief of staff wrote to another employee. "She got her PhD in France, loves red wine, and likes good food above formality."

By 2009, bats had turned into big money. That September, USAID awarded a \$75 million grant called PREDICT to four organizations, including Daszak's. It was "the most comprehensive zoonotic virus surveillance project in the world," USAID stated, and its purpose was to identify and predict viral emergence, in part by sampling and testing bats and other wildlife in remote locations.

The \$18 million over five years awarded to what was then Wildlife Trust was a "game-changer," Daszak told his staff in an ecstatic email sharing the news. "I want to take this opportunity (despite 7 hours of drinking champagne – literally!) to thank all of you for your support."

The money transformed the ragged nonprofit. It increased its budget by half, ending a yearslong operating loss; began a long-deferred rebranding, which led to the new name EcoHealth Alliance; and spruced up its headquarters, even fixing its chronically broken air conditioner. Over the course of the grant, it allocated \$1.1 million to the Wuhan Institute of Virology, USAID **recently acknowledged** in a letter to Congress.

When Dr. Maureen Miller, an infectious disease epidemiologist, arrived at EcoHealth Alliance in 2014, she landed in an environment that she found to be toxic and secretive. Closed-door meetings were the norm. The senior leadership constituted an unwelcoming "old boys network." She soon came to believe that she was hired "because they needed a senior-level woman," she said, adding, "I was excluded from pretty much everything."

She came aboard shortly before the organization's PREDICT grant was renewed for five more years. It was also the year the NIH approved Understanding the Risk of Bat Coronavirus Emergence, the \$3.7 million grant that would come back to haunt Fauci.

Miller said she was “lured by the idea of being able to create a pandemic-threats warning system.”

Miller got to work creating a surveillance strategy to detect zoonotic virus spillover. Chinese villagers living near bat caves in Southern Yunnan province would have their blood tested for antibodies to a SARS-like coronavirus, then answer questionnaires to determine if certain behaviors had led them to be exposed. It was a “biological and behavioral warning system,” Miller explained.

Over the next two years, Miller saw Daszak only a handful of times. But she worked closely with Shi Zhengli, who developed the test to screen the villagers’ blood. In that time, Miller noted, “I never got a result from [Shi] via phone. I had to show up in China to learn anything from her.” From that, Miller gleaned that, while Shi was a “world-class scientist, she respects the Chinese system.” In short, she followed the Chinese government’s rules. (Shi Zhengli did not respond to written questions for this article.)

Miller left EcoHealth Alliance in November 2016, never knowing what became of the strategy she’d developed. But in the fall of 2017, Shi alerted Miller’s former assistant to the fact that Daszak was about to get credit for her work in an upcoming publication. “Shi went out of her way to ensure I would be included,” Miller said. The final version of a letter, published in January 2018 in the Wuhan Institute of Virology’s journal, *Virologica Sinica*, included Miller’s name. Six out of 218 villagers had tested positive for antibodies, suggesting that the strategy was a successful way to gauge potential spillover.

But the experience left Miller with a dark impression of Daszak: “He is so single-minded that he wants to be the one who makes the discovery, without having to share.”

Daszak said Miller has been credited as a coauthor on at least eight papers stemming from her work at EcoHealth Alliance, “a testimony to the equity, fairness, and openness of our publication and authorship practices.” He added that the nonprofit’s staff is “diverse and culturally sensitive” and has been “majority female for 20 years.”

Daszak’s \$3.7 million NIH grant first set off alarm bells in early May 2016, as it entered its third year. The NIH requires annual progress reports, but Daszak’s year-two report was late and the agency threatened to withhold funds until he filed it.

DThe report he finally did submit worried the agency’s grant specialists. It stated that scientists planned to create an infectious clone of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), a novel coronavirus found in dromedaries that had emerged in Saudi Arabia in 2012 and killed 35% of the humans it infected. The report also made clear that the NIH grant had already been used to construct two chimeric coronaviruses similar to the one that caused Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), which emerged in 2002 and went on to cause at least 774 deaths worldwide. (A chimeric virus is one that combines fragments of different viruses.) These revelations prompted the NIH’s grant specialists to ask a critical question: Should the work be subject to a federal moratorium on what was called gain-of-function research?

With that, Daszak’s grant got tangled in a yearslong debate that had divided the virology community. In 2011, two scientists separately announced that they had genetically altered Highly Pathogenic Asian Avian Influenza A (H5N1), the bird flu virus that has killed at least 456 people since 2003. The scientists gave the virus new functions—enabling it to spread efficiently among ferrets, which are genetically closer to humans than mice—as a way to gauge its risks to people. Both studies had received NIH funding.

The scientific community erupted in conflict over what became known as gain-of-function research. Proponents claimed it could help prevent pandemics by highlighting potential threats. Critics argued that creating pathogens that didn’t exist in nature ran the risk of unleashing them. As the dispute raged, Fauci worked to strike a middle ground, but ultimately supported the research, arguing in a coauthored *Washington Post* op-ed that “important information and insights can come from generating a potentially dangerous virus in the laboratory.”

In October 2014, the Obama administration imposed a moratorium on new federal funding for research that could make influenza, MERS, or SARS viruses more virulent or transmissible, while a review took place. But the moratorium, as written, left loopholes, which allowed Daszak to try to save the research. On June 8, 2016, he wrote to the NIH’s grant specialists that the SARS-like chimeras from the completed experiment were exempt from the moratorium, because the strains used had not previously been known to infect humans. He also pointed to a 2015 research paper in

which scientists had infected humanized mice with the same strains, and found that they were less lethal than the original SARS virus.

But the **2015 research paper he cited** was not particularly reassuring. In it, Shi Zhengli and a preeminent coronavirus researcher at the University of North Carolina, Ralph Baric, mixed components of SARS-like viruses from different species, and created a novel chimera that was able to directly infect human cells. (Baric did not respond to written questions seeking comment.)

This gain-of-function experiment, which had begun prior to the moratorium, was so fraught that the authors flagged the dangers themselves, writing, “scientific review panels may deem similar studies...too risky to pursue.” The paper’s acknowledgments cited funding from the NIH and from EcoHealth Alliance, through a different grant.

If anything, the MERS study Daszak proposed was even riskier. So he pitched a compromise to the NIH: that if any of the recombined strains showed 10 times greater growth than a natural virus, “we will immediately: i) stop all experiments with the mutant, ii) inform our NIAID Program Officer and the UNC [Institutional Biosafety Committee] of these results and iii) participate in decision making trees to decide appropriate paths forward.”

This mention of UNC brought a puzzled response from an NIH program officer, who pointed out that the proposal had said the research would be performed at the WIV. “Can you clarify where the work with the chimeric viruses will actually be performed?” the officer wrote. Ten days later, with still no response from Daszak, the program officer emailed him again. On June 27, Daszak responded, buoyant as ever:

“You are correct to identify a mistake in our letter. UNC has no oversight of the chimera work, all of which will be conducted at the Wuhan Institute of Virology.... We will clarify tonight with Prof. Zhengli Shi exactly who will be notified if we see enhanced replication...my understanding is that I will be notified straight away, as [principal investigator], and that I can then notify you at NIAID. Apologies for the error!”

By July 7, the NIH agreed to Daszak’s terms, which relied entirely on mutual transparency: Shi would inform him of any concerning developments involving the lab-constructed viruses, and he would inform the agency. Daszak replied

enthusiastically to a program officer, “This is terrific! We are very happy to hear that our Gain of Function research funding pause has been lifted.”

Allowing such risky research to go forward at the Wuhan Institute of Virology was “simply crazy, in my opinion,” says Jack Nunberg, director of the Montana Biotechnology Center. “Reasons are lack of oversight, lack of regulation, the environment in China,” where scientists who publish in prestigious journals get rewarded by the government, creating dangerous incentives. “So that is what really elevates it to the realm of, ‘No, this shouldn’t happen.’”

A subsequent development seemed to support that view. On January 15, 2021, in the waning days of the Trump administration, the State Department released a fact sheet based on declassified intelligence. It asserted that Chinese military scientists had been collaborating with the WIV’s civilian scientists since 2017, if not earlier. That raised the question of whether research there was being repurposed for offensive or military uses. Though Shi and other WIV leaders have previously denied such collaboration occurred, former deputy national security adviser Matthew Pottinger calls those denials “willful lies. If one were to give them the benefit of the doubt, you might go so far as to say they have no choice but to lie, but these are lies nonetheless.”

If China’s military had been collaborating with WIV scientists, it’s unclear if Daszak would have realized it. He had far less visibility into the WIV than he let on, a former EcoHealth Alliance staffer told *Vanity Fair*. The work being done there was “always an enigma,” the former staffer said. The nonprofit had hired a U.S.-based Chinese national who helped “interpret for them what was happening inside the WIV.... But we had to take everything at face value. It was more, ‘Accept what it is, because of this relationship’” between Shi and Daszak.

“He doesn’t know what happened in that lab,” said the former staffer. “He cannot know that.”

According to Daszak, EcoHealth Alliance “was aware” of the WIV’s research activities related to its NIH grant. He says he had no knowledge of Chinese military involvement there and was never notified of any by the U.S. government.

y 2017, despite massive infusions of grant money, EcoHealth Alliance faced a brewing financial crisis. Ninety-one percent of its funding came from the federal government,

B and 71% of that came from the PREDICT grant, according to minutes of the organization's finance committee meeting. The renewed grant, known as PREDICT II, was slated to end in two years. There was no way to know if the grant would be reauthorized for a third time. The looming possibility that it would expire came to be known internally as the "PREDICT cliff."

How to prevent the organization from tumbling over it consumed meeting after meeting. One possible solution was the Global Virome Project, a nongovernmental initiative being organized by the infectious disease specialist Dennis Carroll, who had established PREDICT while working at USAID. The Global Virome Project was far more ambitious: Its goal was to map every possible virus on earth—an estimated 840,000 of which might infect human beings—as a way to "end the pandemic era."

The program had a steep projected price tag of \$3.4 billion over 10 years, Daszak explained to board members. But the cost of not knowing and suffering a pandemic was estimated at \$17 trillion over 30 years. Looked at that way, the Global Virome Project was a relative bargain.

But there was another way that EcoHealth Alliance could ward off the \$8 million shortfall it was facing. The Defense Department could serve as a federal life raft in a new ocean of grants. The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) was seeking proposals for a new program called PREEMPT, which aimed to identify animal pathogens "to preempt their entry into human populations before an outbreak occurs."

For EcoHealth Alliance, the PREEMPT grant seemed like a slam dunk. For years, Daszak had been developing a method of predictive modeling to identify likely sites of viral spillover around the world and stop pandemics at the source. Some questioned the effectiveness of Daszak's approach. "In 20 years of using this method, [EcoHealth Alliance] did not predict a single outbreak, epidemic or pandemic," Maureen Miller told *Vanity Fair*. But David Morens, senior adviser to the NIAID director, said that Daszak became one of the "key players" in understanding that "emerging diseases came from animals, the animals had their own geographic ranges, and if you knew where the animals were and what diseases they carried, you could predict hot spots."

EcoHealth Alliance also doubled down on another key selling point: Its unique on-the-ground connections in China would effectively give the U.S. government a foothold in

foreign laboratories. As Daszak had told his staff at a meeting some years earlier, one Defense Department subagency wanted “information on what is going on in countries in which they cannot access (China, Brazil, Indonesia, India).”

With the PREDICT cliff and the DARPA deadline coming ever closer, Daszak struck an upbeat note with his board, pointing out that the organization had a strong track record of winning federal grants. “This was the golden ticket,” a former staffer familiar with the DARPA grant application said. “The message was always, ‘We are going to do cool and cutting-edge science. DARPA is the right agency to fund this.’”

Last September, **EcoHealth Alliance’s grant proposal to DARPA** was leaked to DRASTIC, a loosely affiliated global group of sleuths—ranging from professional scientists to amateur data enthusiasts—dedicated to investigating the origins of COVID-19. From the 75-page proposal, a striking detail stood out: a plan to examine SARS-like bat coronaviruses for furin cleavage sites and possibly insert new ones that would enable them to infect human cells.

A furin cleavage site is a spot in the surface protein of a virus that can boost its entry into human cells. SARS-CoV-2, which emerged more than a year after the DARPA grant was submitted, is notable among SARS-like coronaviruses for **having a unique furin cleavage site**. This anomaly has led some scientists to consider whether the virus could have emerged from laboratory work gone awry.

Documents obtained by *Vanity Fair* shed new light on the chaotic process surrounding the DARPA proposal, which was cocreated with colleagues including Shi Zhengli at the WIV and Ralph Baric at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. As the March deadline approached, the grant’s collaborators worked 24/7, with versions pouring in from around the world. “Those documents were being written by many, many people,” one former employee recalled.

The grant application proposed to collect bat samples from caves in Yunnan Province, transport them to the Wuhan Institute of Virology, extract and manipulate the viruses they contain, and use them to infect mice with humanized lungs. It would then map high-risk areas for bats harboring dangerous pathogens and treat test caves with substances to reduce the amount of virus they were shedding.

It was a long way from saving manatees from motorboats.

By almost any definition, this was gain-of-function research. The federal moratorium had been lifted in January 2017 and replaced with a review system called the HHS P3CO Framework (for Potential Pandemic Pathogen Care and Oversight). This required a safety review by the agency funding the research.

EcoHealth Alliance's DARPA proposal asserted that its research was exempt from the P3CO framework. It also emphasized the extensive experience of the team it would assemble. But at a staff meeting on March 29, Daszak expressed dismay at the slapdash and amateur nature of the DARPA submission. It was a "major failure on all accounts," he noted, enumerating a cascade of mistakes: The application was late, sent in "30 minutes after deadline." There were errors uploading documents, comment boxes that remained on the pages, a question of who was in charge. What was needed, he exhorted his staff, was a "change in culture" as "part of [a] mentality [sic] to get money," according to the meeting minutes.

EcoHealth Alliance's controversial rejected DARPA grant proposal is described as a "major failure" in staff meeting minutes. [Click here to see and download the document.](#)

Inside DARPA, the grant application was met with immediate skepticism. The contract was "never awarded because of the horrific lack of common sense" it reflected, said a former DARPA official who was there at the time. EcoHealth Alliance was viewed as a "ragtag group" and a "middle guy," a backseat collaborator willing to get on an Air China jet, eat terrible food, and stay in bad hotels, said the former official.

Likewise, the WIV was also viewed as subpar, especially when compared with the Harbin Veterinary Research Institute, which operated China's only other high-containment laboratory with the highest biosafety protocol: BSL-4. Harbin was China's Harvard, said the former DARPA official. The WIV was more like a safety school. EcoHealth Alliance had "bolted on" a serious scientist, Ralph Baric, and "podged" the proposal together. Having the nonprofit serve as the prime contractor for a global project with national security risks was like "having your rental car agency trying to run an armada," said the former DARPA official.

Though two of three DARPA reviewers deemed it "selectable," the third, a program manager in the Biological Technologies Office, recommended against funding it. He wrote that the application did not adequately mention or assess the gain-of-function risk or the possibility that the proposed work could constitute dual-use research of concern (DURC), the technical term for science that can be repurposed to cause harm or endanger security.

The DARPA proposal was "basically a road map to a SARS-CoV-2-like virus," says virologist Simon Wain-Hobson, who is among the scientists calling for a fuller investigation of COVID-19's origins. If the research had the blessing of a top coronavirus scientist like Baric, then it is possible the WIV would have wanted to copy what it viewed as cutting-edge science, he said. "That doesn't mean they did it. But it means it's legitimate to ask the question."

According to Daszak, no one at DARPA expressed any concerns about the proposed research to EcoHealth Alliance. On the contrary, he said, "DARPA told us that 'we had a strong proposal' and 'wished DARPA had greater funding for the PREEMPT program.'" He added, "the research was never done by EHA or, to my knowledge, any of the collaborating partners on that proposal."

By late December 2019, cases of what would soon be identified as SARS-CoV-2 began emerging around the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in the Jiangnan district of Wuhan, roughly eight miles from the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

Daszak seemed poised to play a leading role in the emerging crisis. On January 2, 2020, he tweeted: “The GOOD news!! is that leading scientists from the US, China and many other countries are working together to actively block the ability of these viruses to spillover, and to rapidly detect them if they do.” He continued, “This includes active collaboration with China CDC, Wuhan Inst. Virology, @DukeNUS, @Baric_Lab, and a diverse array of Provincial CDCs, universities and labs across S. and Central China.”

On January 30, Daszak went on CGTN America, the U.S. outpost for Chinese state television, and said two things that proved to be spectacularly wrong. “I’m very optimistic...that this outbreak will begin to slow down,” he said. “We’re seeing a small amount of human-to-human transmission in other countries, but it’s not uncontrollable.” He went on to conclude that the Chinese government was taking all necessary steps “to be open and transparent, and work with WHO, and talk to scientists from around the world, and where necessary, bring them in to help. They’re doing that. It’s exactly what needs to happen.”

In fact, the opposite was true. The virus was spreading uncontrollably and the Chinese government was busy crushing anyone who spoke out: It ordered laboratory samples destroyed, punished doctors who raised alarms, and claimed the right to review any scientific research about COVID-19 ahead of publication, a restriction that remains in place today.

At the highest levels of the U.S. government, alarm was growing over the question of where the virus had originated and whether research performed at the WIV, and funded in part by U.S. taxpayers, had played some role in its emergence.

To Dr. Robert Redfield, the director of the CDC at the time, it seemed not only possible but likely that the virus had originated in a lab. “I personally felt it wasn’t biologically plausible that [SARS CoV-2] went from bats to humans through an [intermediate] animal and became one of the most infectious viruses to humans,” he told *Vanity Fair*.

Neither the 2002 SARS virus nor the 2012 MERS virus had transmitted with such devastating efficiency from one person to another.

What had changed? The difference, Redfield believed, was the gain-of-function research that Shi and Baric had published in 2015, and that EcoHealth Alliance had helped to fund. They had established that it was possible to alter a SARS-like bat coronavirus so that it would infect human cells via a protein called the ACE2 receptor. Although their experiments had taken place in Baric's well-secured laboratory in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, who was to say that the WIV had not continued the research on its own?

In mid-January of 2020, *Vanity Fair* can reveal, Redfield expressed his concerns in separate phone conversations with three scientific leaders: Fauci; Jeremy Farrar, the director of the U.K.'s Wellcome Trust; and Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director general of the World Health Organization (WHO). Redfield's message, he says, was simple: "We had to take the lab-leak hypothesis with extreme seriousness."

It is not clear whether Redfield's concerns are what sparked Fauci's own. But on Saturday night, February 1, at 12:30 a.m., Fauci emailed the NIAID's principal deputy director, Hugh Auchincloss, under the subject line "IMPORTANT." He attached the 2015 paper by Baric and Shi and wrote, "Hugh: It is essential that we speak this AM. Keep your cell phone on." He instructed Auchincloss to read the attached paper and added, "You will have tasks today that must be done."

February 1 proved to be a critical day. With the death count in China passing 300 and cases popping up in more than a dozen countries, Farrar convened a group of 11 top scientists across five time zones. That morning, he asked Fauci to join. "My preference is to keep this group really tight," Farrar wrote. "Obviously ask everyone to treat in total confidence." Fauci, Francis Collins, Kristian Andersen, and Robert Garry all joined the call. No one invited Redfield, or even told him it was happening.

In the conference call and emails that followed over the next four days, the scientists parsed the peculiarities of SARS-CoV-2's genomic sequence, paying special attention to the furin cleavage site.

Dr. Michael Farzan, an immunologist, told a member of the group that the anomaly could result from sustained interaction between a chimeric virus and human tissue in a

laboratory that lacked appropriate biocontainment protocols, “accidentally creating a virus that would be primed for rapid transmission between humans,” according to an emailed summary of the discussion. He leaned toward the lab-origin hypothesis, saying, “I think it becomes a question of...whether you believe in this series of coincidences, what you know of the lab in Wuhan, how much could be in nature—accidental release or natural event? I am 70:30 or 60:40.”

He was not alone. Garry wrote of the “stunning” composition of the furin cleavage site: “I really can’t think of a plausible natural scenario where you get from the bat virus or one very similar to it to [SARS-CoV-2] where you insert exactly 4 amino acids 12 nucleotide[s] that all have to be added at the exact same time to gain this function.... I just can’t figure out how this gets accomplished in nature.”

The previous evening, Andersen had emailed Fauci, saying that he and scientists including Garry, Farzan, and the Australian virologist Edward Holmes all found the genetic sequence “inconsistent with expectations from evolutionary theory.”

But within three days, four of the scientists on the call, including Andersen, Garry, and Holmes, had shared the draft of a letter arguing the opposite. Farrar shared a copy with Fauci, who offered feedback ahead of its publication on March 17 in *Nature Medicine*. The letter, *The Proximal Origin of SARS-CoV-2*, analyzed the genomic sequence and made a seemingly unequivocal statement: “we do not believe that any type of laboratory-based scenario is plausible.”

How they arrived at such certainty within four days remains unclear. In his book *Spike: The Virus vs. The People—the Inside Story*, Farrar cited “the addition of important new information, endless analyses, intense discussions and many sleepless nights.” But even as they circulated the draft on February 4, qualms remained. Farrar wrote to Collins and Fauci that, while Holmes now argued against an engineered virus, he was still “60-40 lab.”

A Wellcome spokesman told *Vanity Fair*, “Dr. Farrar is in regular conversation with and regularly convenes many other expert scientists.” He added, “Dr. Farrar’s view is that there was at no stage any political influence or interference during these conversations, or in the research carried out.” Garry said that it was “frankly tiresome to explain for the umpteenth time that that was one email cherry-picked among dozens, even hundreds, in part of an ongoing scientific discussion.”

Though he wasn't part of those conversations, the epidemiologist W. Ian Lipkin told *Vanity Fair*, "I have known Fauci for 30 years. Fauci is not interested in anything but the truth. Anyone that says anything otherwise doesn't know him."

Lipkin was added as a fifth author on the Proximal Origin letter. On February 11, 2020, ahead of publication, he emailed a coauthor to say that a draft provided "a plausible argument against genetic engineering" but did "not eliminate the possibility of inadvertent release" through routine laboratory work cultivating a virus at the WIV. He added, "Given the scale of the bat CoV research pursued there and the site of emergence of the first human cases we have a nightmare of circumstantial evidence to assess."

W. Ian Lipkin's email to a coauthor of The Proximal Origin of SARS-CoV-2, expressing his view that a draft of the letter did not rule out a lab hypothesis. [Click here to see and download the email.](#)

While the Proximal Origin letter acknowledged the issue of previous laboratory accidents involving the original SARS coronavirus, it dismissed a possible accident as the source of SARS-CoV-2. Lipkin was not invited to participate in future publications with the group, such as the preprints by Andersen and Worobey that made it onto the front page of *The New York Times* in February. "I can speculate on why I've not been asked to join various publications. However, I don't know why I've not been asked," he said.

While Andersen and the others were fine-tuning the Proximal Origin letter, Daszak was quietly working to bury speculation of a lab leak. On February 19, in a letter published in the influential medical journal *The Lancet*, he joined 26 scientists in asserting, "We stand together to strongly condemn conspiracy theories suggesting that COVID-19 does not have a natural origin." Nine months later, [emails released by a](#)

Freedom of Information group showed that Daszak had orchestrated the *Lancet* statement with the intention of concealing his role and creating the impression of scientific unanimity.

Under the subject line, “No need for you to sign the ‘Statement’ Ralph!!,” he wrote to Baric and another scientist: “you, me and him should not sign this statement, so it has some distance from us and therefore doesn’t work in a counterproductive way.” Daszak added, “We’ll then put it out in a way that doesn’t link it back to our collaboration so we maximize an independent voice.”

Baric agreed, writing back, “Otherwise it looks self-serving and we lose impact.”

The *Lancet* statement ended with a declaration of objectivity: “We declare no competing interests.” Among its signatories were Jeremy Farrar and one other participant in the confidential huddle with Fauci.

Reading the *Lancet* letter, with Farrar’s name attached to it, Redfield had a dawning realization. He concluded there’d been a concerted effort not just to suppress the lab-leak theory but to manufacture the appearance of a scientific consensus in favor of a natural origin. “They made a decision, almost a P.R. decision, that they were going to push one point of view only” and suppress rigorous debate, said Redfield. “They argued they did it in defense of science, but it was antithetical to science.”

A Wellcome spokesperson told *Vanity Fair*, “The letter was a simple statement of solidarity with highly reputable researchers based in China and against non-evidence-based theories. Dr. Farrar does not believe the letter was covertly organized. He had no conflict of interest to declare.”

As the pandemic spread to every corner of the globe, Daszak continued to devote his considerable energies to promoting the idea that science itself had reached consensus: The virus emerged from nature, not a lab. But as one concerning detail after another slipped into public view, the facade of unanimity began to crack, exposing his own work to questions.

During a White House COVID-19 press briefing on April 17, 2020, a reporter for the right-wing television network Newsmax asked President Trump why the NIH would

fund a \$3.7 million grant to a high-level lab in China. The details were wrong, and the question seemed queued-up to feed an anti-China political agenda. Trump responded, “We will end that grant very quickly.”

That exchange, in turn, uncorked a question from another reporter to Fauci: Could SARS-CoV-2 have come from a lab? His answer from the White House podium was swift and clear. A recently published analysis from a “group of highly qualified evolutionary virologists” had concluded that the virus was “totally consistent with a jump of a species from an animal to a human.” He was referring to the Proximal Origin letter, drafted by some of the scientists he’d met with confidentially in early February.

The next day, Daszak sent an email of profuse thanks to Fauci for “publicly standing up and stating that the scientific evidence supports a natural origin for COVID-19 from a bat-to-human spillover, not a lab release from the Wuhan Institute of Virology.” Fauci responded, thanking him back.

If Daszak thought that Fauci’s kind words meant his grant was safe, he was mistaken. Six days later, he received a sharply worded letter from a senior NIH official: His bat coronavirus research grant, which had provided subgrants to the WIV, was being terminated. Amid an uproar and legal threats, the agency reinstated the grant several months later, but suspended its activities. So began a bitter, ongoing battle between Daszak and the NIH over whether he’d complied with the grant’s terms. Swaths of this private correspondence **have become public since last September**, as part of a FOIA lawsuit waged by The Intercept.

Daszak also found himself answering increasingly pointed questions about the WIV’s decision to take down its online database of 22,000 genomic sequences in September 2019, prior to the known onset of the pandemic.

Maureen Miller says the human blood samples that were collected in China as part of the surveillance strategy she designed at EcoHealth Alliance could hold clues to COVID-19’s provenance. But they went into the WIV and are now out of reach. Why would a database supported by U.S. tax dollars to help prevent and respond to a pandemic be made “inaccessible exactly when it was needed to fulfill its intended purpose?” asks Jamie Metzl, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, who was among the first to call for a full investigation of COVID-19’s origins.

Presumably, Daszak possessed a great deal of that inaccessible data. He said as much during a March 2021 panel organized by a London-based think tank: “A lot of this work has been conducted with EcoHealth Alliance.... We do basically know what’s in those databases.” Previously, EcoHealth Alliance had signed a pledge, along with 57 other scientific and medical organizations, to share data promptly in the event of a global public health emergency. And yet, in the face of just such an emergency, Daszak told *Nature* magazine, “We don’t think it’s fair that we should have to reveal everything we do.”

In April 2020, he **warned colleagues** from other institutions that partnered on the PREDICT grants not to publicly release certain sequences. “All - It’s extremely important that we don’t have these sequences as part of our PREDICT release to Genbank at this point,” he wrote. “As you may have heard, these were part of a grant just terminated by NIH. Having them as part of PREDICT will [bring] very unwelcome attention to” the PREDICT program, grant partners, and USAID.

By October 2021, the NIH had repeatedly demanded that EcoHealth Alliance turn over data related to its grant research with the WIV. Daszak argued that he couldn’t share a number of SARS coronavirus sequences because he was waiting for the Chinese government to authorize their release. The explanation seemed to undercut the entire rationale for having the U.S. government help fund a global collaboration on virus emergence.

Daszak said it was “incorrect” to suggest that EcoHealth Alliance had not “readily shared data,” and asserted that all of its relevant coronavirus data from NIH-supported research at the WIV has now been made public. He added that he warned about “unwelcome attention” because he wanted “to avoid [colleagues] being dragged into the political fray unfairly” after the NIH’s decision to terminate EcoHealth Alliance’s grant “unleashed a torrent of unwarranted political attacks.”

US. officials and at least one of Daszak’s former colleagues were stunned when, in November 2020, the WHO announced the names of 11 international experts assigned to a fact-finding mission to China to investigate COVID-19’s origins. China had veto power over the list,

and none of the three candidates put forward by the U.S. had made the cut. Instead, Peter Daszak was listed as America's sole representative.

It's still unclear how Daszak wound up on the commission. "I didn't want to go, and I said no initially," he later told *Science* magazine, before adding, "If you want to get to the bottom of the origins of a coronavirus outbreak in China, the number one person you should be talking to is the person who works on coronaviruses in China, who's not from China.... So that's me, unfortunately."

Daszak told *Vanity Fair*, "WHO reached out to me and asked me to serve on the committee. I initially refused, but...following their persuasive arguments decided that it was my duty as a scientist to support the origins investigation." A WHO spokesperson would neither confirm nor deny Daszak's account.

One former EcoHealth staffer thinks it's obvious who tapped Daszak for the role: "If his name was not among the names floated [by the U.S.], his was the name that the Chinese government chose."

In China, the experts spent half of their monthlong mission quarantined in hotels. Once released, they made one trip to the Wuhan Institute of Virology. Daszak later described the visit to *60 Minutes*: "We met with them. We said, 'Do you audit the lab?' And they said, 'Annually.' 'Did you audit it after the outbreak?' 'Yes.' 'Was anything found?' 'No.' 'Do you test your staff?' 'Yes.' No one was—"

The correspondent, Lesley Stahl, interrupted: "But you're just taking their word for it." Daszak responded, "Well, what else can we do? There's a limit to what you can do and we went right up to that limit. We asked them tough questions.... And the answers they gave, we found to be believable—correct and convincing."

On March 24, 2021, Daszak presented a confidential preview of the WHO mission's findings to a group of federal health and national security officials in a packed government conference room. Dressed in a tweed jacket instead of his usual hiking gear, he clicked through a 36-slide presentation, which *Vanity Fair* obtained.

Peter Daszak's 36-slide presentation summarizing the deliberations of the WHO-convened study on COVID-19's origins. [Click here to see and download the full presentation.](#)

Amid the charts, graphs, and old photos from the Huanan market of caged animals that could have harbored the virus, there was one slide devoted to the Wuhan Institute of Virology. It seemed to suggest that the questions swirling around the laboratory as a possible source of the pandemic could be put to rest. There had been annual external audits with no unusual findings. Access was strictly controlled. And his trusted partner Shi Zhengli said there had been no COVID-like illnesses among her staff.

The presentation complete, Daszak held up his hands, as if waiting for a standing ovation, the attendee recounted: "His ego couldn't fit in the room with all those interagency partners."

The WHO Commission released its 120-page final report a week later. The experts had voted, by a show of hands, that direct transmission from bat to human was possible to likely; transmission through an intermediate animal was likely to very likely;

transmission through frozen food was possible; and transmission through a laboratory incident was “extremely unlikely.”

The report was so error-riddled and unpersuasive that WHO director general Tedros effectively disowned it the day it was released. “As far as WHO is concerned all hypotheses remain on the table,” he said.

Three months later, the commission’s lead expert, Danish food scientist Peter Ben Embarek, extinguished the last embers of the report’s credibility. He confessed to a documentary film crew that the group had made a backroom deal with the 17 Chinese experts attached to the commission: The report could mention the lab-leak theory only “on the condition we didn’t recommend any specific studies to further that hypothesis” and used the phrase “extremely unlikely” to characterize it.

But that wasn’t the final shoe to drop. Daszak himself all but admitted—in a letter to Dr. Michael Lauer, the NIH’s deputy director for extramural research—that he had signed on to the WHO mission with a personal and professional agenda: to gather exculpatory information about the WIV, in part to help lift the curtain of suspicion around his grant so it could be reinstated.

“I have made extensive efforts to satisfy NIH’s broad concerns,” he wrote on April 11, 2021. “This includes serving as an expert on the WHO-China joint Mission on the Animal Origins of COVID-19, which involved 1 month on the ground in China (including 2 weeks locked in quarantine), at great personal burden and risk to me, to our organization, and to my family.”

He wrote that, while he had “acted in good faith” to follow the WHO’s directives for the mission, he had also gathered essential information that “specifically addresses” one of the demands the NIH had made as a condition of reinstating the grant: that he arrange for an outside inspection team to find out if the WIV had SARS-CoV-2 in its possession prior to December 2019. He’d returned with “categorical statements from WIV senior staff” that they did not have it prior to December 2019, he wrote, and had managed to get their assurances included in the WHO final report.

Unfortunately for Daszak, the NIH was unmoved. The grant remains suspended today.

On February 25, 2022, a day before Worobey, Andersen, Garry, and their 15 coauthors rushed their preprints into the public domain, claiming “dispositive evidence” that SARS-CoV-2 originated from the Huanan market, China’s CDC published **a preprint of its own** that contained new data and pointed to a different conclusion. It revealed that, of the 457 swabs taken from 18 species of animals in the market, none contained any evidence of the virus. Rather, the virus was found in 73 swabs taken from around the market’s environment, all linked to human infections. Thus, while the samples proved the market served as an “amplifier” of viral spread, they did not prove the market was the source.

Meanwhile, an analysis **published on March 16 in the medical journal *BMJ Global Health***, written by a group of Italian scientists and coauthored by Sergei Pond, cites a growing body of studies indicating that the virus may have been spreading worldwide for weeks, or even months, before the officially recognized start date of December 2019. If true, this would entirely upend the presumption of the market as the genesis of the pandemic.

“There are still a lot of credible questions that have not been answered,” says Pond. And with “no overwhelming evidence in either direction,” he adds, he is “puzzled as to why it’s necessary to push in one direction.” (Responding to written questions, Andersen said, “I have no particular stake in the idea that SARS-CoV-2 came from the market and not from virology research. The science speaks for itself and the evidence is clear.”)

Simon Wain-Hobson has his own hypothesis for what is taking place: The group of scientists pushing the claim of natural origin, he says, “want to show that virology is not responsible [for causing the pandemic]. That is their agenda.”

Additional research by Rebecca Aydin and Stan Friedman.

Update: After publication, W. Ian Lipkin asked to add additional context to what he previously told Vanity Fair regarding his discussion with the coauthors of the Proximal Origin letter, published in Nature Medicine on March 17, 2020. He expressed the view that the draft letter did “not eliminate the possibility” that SARS-CoV-2 could have come from “inadvertent release” during routine laboratory work at the Wuhan Institute of Virology. This story has been updated to reflect that change.

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